

Wanxin Zhang: a ten-year survey
Ceramics Monthly. June-August, 2010

The world of Wanxin Zhang — borderless, uncharted, strewn with vestiges of 2000 years of history East and West — might be the last stop on a time machine gone berserk.

Zhang, born in 1961 in Changchun, China, spent his formative years a captive observer of Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution, during which basic freedoms — including artistic expression — were brutally suppressed and political propaganda dictated the collective worldview. When, in 1974, the burial tomb of China's first emperor Qin Shi Huang was opened at Xi'an and its 7500 terra cotta warriors and horses unearthed from four excavation pits, Mao, surrounded by his own army, the Red Guards, neared the end of his reign. More than a decade later, Zhang, then a graduate student at the Luxun Institute of Fine Art, visited the tomb. Thus was conceived Pit #5, Zhang's ongoing counter-proposition comprising more than 100 contemporary "warriors" adrift in a fathomless, time-warped Neverland.

"Wanxin Zhang: A Ten Year Survey," recently on view at the Arizona State University Art Museum (<http://asuartmuseum.asu.edu>) in Tempe, Arizona, marks the artistic achievements, 1999 through 2009, of this Chinese-born artist now residing in San Francisco. Zhang's kaleidoscopic oeuvre, distinguished by cultural collision and anarchic juxtapositions of antiquities and high-tech, has earned such awards as the NEA/Warhol Foundation Artist-in-Residency, Virginia A. Groot Foundation first prize, and Joan Mitchell Grant. His figurative ceramic sculptures, masterfully coiled, modeled, distressed, cut into pieces, and later reconstructed post-firing, are displayed and collected internationally.

Zhang has traveled far — from Chinese classicism to California Funk to a fusion uniquely his own. For a "snapshot" of his evolution the viewer need only glance at the drawing Artist and His Two Teachers (2007), one of three working sketches included in the survey. In it, an inquiring young Zhang stands squarely to the right of Mao Tse-tung and Robert Arneson with his eyes fixed on a horizon only he can see.

The earliest sculpture included in the survey, Good Morning, Mr. Boccioni (1999), depicts a neo-Futurist female figure bursting through a stone wall. The wall fractures, tearing pieces from the individual, who emerges defaced, mutilated, and yet oddly whole, testament to the ascendancy of the human spirit over societal strictures and oppression.

There follows the inception of the Pit #5 series, represented by three mid-scale warriors blindered by Zhang's signature opaque eyeglasses. If, as the saying goes, the eyes mirror the human soul, then the sculptor has forged alternative pathways, laying bare the vulnerability and indecision of his subjects through gesture, stance, texture and, with evident respect for his material, the temperament of the clay itself. Poet of the Battlefield (2002) achieves emotional eloquence through Zhang's achingly nuanced rendering of the figure's craned neck, parted lips, and interlaced fingers, Mulan (2002) by way of an upturned palm so affecting that its very emptiness seems to brim over.

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From 2004, coinciding with Zhang's move to a larger work space, his figures grow to full human scale and beyond. Ironically, the greater the figures' bulk, the more tentative their postures and ambiguous their attitude. For some, the opaque glasses come off, only to be replaced by a zombie-like stare, or, in the case of *Wind Mask* (2008), an eye covering with no aperture at all. *Warrior with a Color Face* (2008) gazes blankly ahead, robbed of sight by the primary-colored glazes splashed clown-like across his unreadable features. A metaphysical smog seems to hang over these giants, isolating them one from the other and, more ominously, from their own volition.

Two recent Pit #5 additions commemorate events of global import. *Inauguration Day* (2009), inspired by President Obama's swearing-in ceremony, uses the tattered figure of a lone African-American standing with hand on heart to convey the occasions solemnity. *Imperfect Square II* (2009) marks the twentieth anniversary of China's student movement, culminating in the siege of Tiananmen Square. Although Zhang's warriors seldom emulate heroes, this iconic image of a Chinese dissident facing-off with a line of armored tanks stands at the apex of the artist's personal pantheon. The figure rises from a glossy red puddle — the blood shed by hundreds of unarmed warriors whose faces we will never glimpse.

Another intriguing exception is the show's single non-figurative sculpture. *Impossible ///* (2009), an apocalyptic synthesis of the airy dome of the US Capitol Building and majestic pagodas of China's Forbidden City, lists like a sinking ship, sounding a warning against self-aggrandizing regimes wherever they may spawn.

I have saved for last Zhang's *Warhol/Mao* (2009). The most massive figure in the survey and, arguably, its most charismatic, this pastel-colored effigy with its open stance, bemused eyes, and grandfatherly beneficence sets on end the bogeyman stereotype. By including his childhood nemesis among his warriors, the artist strips him of celebrity. Neither exalted nor damned, impervious nor chastened, Chairman Mao takes his place in Zhang's army of the perplexed.

To enter the world of Wanxin Zhang is to witness the dawning of the "Age of the Individual" in all its patchwork splendor. Poignant, humbled, haunting, his warriors embody every battle ever fought, every thwarted dream, and yet at once — herein lies their genius — humankind's singular and defining quest for freedom.

By Germaine Shames

Wanxin Zhang: A Ten Year Survey, organized by the Ceramics Research Center at Arizona State University Art Museum and curated by Peter Held, curator of ceramics, and Mindy Solomon for the Morean Arts Center, will be on display at the Boise Art Museum, Boise, Idaho, from May 22 through September 19, 2010 and at the Morean Arts Center, St. Petersburg, Florida from October 8-December 31, 2010. Upcoming tour venues include the Bellevue Arts Museum, Bellevue, Washington, and Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California. The exhibition was made possible by Ceramic Leaders at ASU and the Joseph Dung Ceramic Initiative, in cooperation with Udinotti Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona. For more information on Wanxin Zhang, see www.wanxinzhang.com.